

Interviewed by Mike Brown.

Mike Brown (MB): This is an interview with Mr. N. J. Meagher, 1163 South 500 West, Vernal, Utah, on this tenth day of February 1978. This is Mike Brown of the Golden Age Center. (Mike Brown has evidently asked Mr. Meagher to relate the story of his father, Mr. N. J. Meagher Sr.)

Nick Meagher (Nick): I don't know what you want on him. Do you want his history?

MB: Oh, we could start with that. Can you tell me how he happen to come here?

Nick: Well, he was born in Ireland in about 1877. He had a brother who was one of the first oil field hands with the Texas Company down in Texas. His parents died. His mother was sick, and before she died, his brother in Texas said, "Well, send him over to this country, and I'll take care of him."

So they sent him over when he was fourteen, and he landed, he had somebody meet him in New York. They took him and sent him on to Notre Dame, which was a high school and a college. Of course, he was a ward of his older brother. He left him in Notre Dame for about seven and one half years. So in 1898, when he became twenty-one, in December of 1898, he went to Chicago and became naturalized. Of course, in those days, a lot of students of Notre Dame were from Butte, Montana, and Park City, Utah, and the mines of the west.

So as soon as he could get out of there he headed west. He went to Pueblo, Colorado, first. Then he knew the Boyles in Salt Lake City, Utah, pretty well. They had the old Semlo Hotel in Salt Lake. So, he moved on from Pueblo into Salt Lake City, in probably 1899. Then he got a job in Salt Lake City. He went up to Park City and saw some of those fellows. He got a job on the placer mining operation up in Idaho.

Then, he came back to Salt Lake and started teaching school for about two or three hours a day in math and shorthand. He got a job with the old National Bank of the Republic in Salt Lake, which is a bank right behind Walker Bank, and which was the predecessor of Continental Bank in Salt Lake City. During that time he was [also] teaching at a school called All Hallows College. He coached their football team and met some of the fellows from the [Uinta] Basin here, particularly, Horace Coltharp and Hugh Coltharp, who were going to school out there.

About that time, why, they were going to open the Uinta Basin for settlement. The Bennions, from Vernal, S. R. Bennion and a group of them, wanted to form a bank for the opening of the reservation. All the banking business had been done by the Ashley Co-op, the Vernal mercantile association, up until that time.

So, the Bennions and the Coltharps and Mr. William Siddoway—and I believe S. R. Browne—some of them were in there interviewing young fellows to come out and show them how to run a bank. They had made two or three trips in there [Salt Lake], and finally, why, Coltharp knew Mr. Meagher pretty well, having been his teacher, so they went and got a hold of him and asked him if he would leave the National Bank of the Republic and come out and help, I think it was Enos Bennion, start a bank out here. They would go ahead and get a state banking charter, and get ready for the opening of the reservation in 1905. He finally agreed to come out

for one year, and I think his pay would be \$125 a month. Then, he would go on back into Salt Lake.

He came to Vernal on Thanksgiving Day of 1903, and they opened the bank in December of 1903—the Bank of Vernal—which was the first bank in the Uinta Basin.

At the end of the year, why, he wanted to leave and they said that the people were starting to come into the Basin, and they just insisted that he stay to handle wires that would come in to give credit to the fellows, so that they could live here while they made reconnaissance trips as to what land they wanted. The whole Basin and the town was pretty well-loaded with surveyors and everybody that wanted to take up land. So he stayed and got investing with it. He took up a couple of pieces of land of his own, and got investing with some of the old-timers. He ran the bank from 1903 for sixty-five years.

During that time, why, the big problem before the opening of the reservation, was who owned the water rights, because under the Brigham Young Treaty which was signed by Abe Lincoln when Utah became a state, the Brigham Young Treaty was to give \$2 an acre, as I recall it, for all the land of Utah, plus the value of the water rights, plus the value of the mineral rights. He started a friendly suit against the State of Utah and the federal government and the Indians to determine who actually owned the water, because the land wasn't worth anything without the water.

That's a very famous case. In fact, that's the case on which all water rights are based here in Utah, which is prior appropriation for beneficial use, and with that, why then, the Dry Gulch Irrigation Company and all the little canal companies that came along had a semblance of a water right by using it and putting it on the land. They would get these decrees even though the Brigham Young Treaty said the Indians owned all the water. If it wasn't used, why, after seven or eight years, statutorily, why, you would lose it.

As a result of that law case, the theory of water rights for this arid area was prior appropriation for beneficial use, and then the canal companies were organized. He helped finance, and was in on the organization of, an awful lot of the different canal companies— Ouray Park, Colorado Park, just a number of them.

Then in 1905, of course, they opened the reservation, and the settlers made their filings on the different tracts of land. In 1913, or 1914, why, the Bank of Vernal, which had been in the old Ashley Co-operative Mercantile Building right there where Thorne's Studio is, that old vault is still in that building, that's where the original Bank of Vernal was. They decided that they had out-grown their facility, and so then they turned around and the Coltharp Mercantile Company, which had stores in Myton and Whiterocks, Watson and Rangely, decided to develop the corner where the Bank of Vernal and Ashton's are. They owned that quarter of a block.

They wanted pressed brick on the outer portion of the building because all the native brick was just soft sandstone. So they ordered these bricks from the Salt Lake Brick Company. They shipped them out here by parcel post to surface the outside of the bank building, which was a glazed brick. That happened in about 1916. There are a lot of good stories about that building, because it was shipped by parcel post to comply with the postal regulations. They could ship it by standard-gauge to Mack, Colorado, and by narrow-gauge to Watson. Then they would bring it in by teams and wagons and cross on the ferry across the Green River, and bring it on into Vernal. They had a "crabbit" little postmaster, and he insisted that when these wagonloads of brick would come in, that it was parcel post and it had to go through the Post Office and get his stamp on it. Those old, tobacco-chewing teamsters said, "Naw, we want to unload them over

where they are going to use them.”

He said, “No, you got to put them through the Post Office.”

So this one teamster unloaded probably a wagonload, or half a wagonload—I don’t know if this is a fact, but it is quite a story the old-timers used to talk about. They unloaded these bricks on him in the Post Office and backed the wagon in front of it, and said, “All right now, you carry them through the damn Post Office.” [Laughter] After that, he was most willing to go over and take his stamp, and stamp those crates of brick, there were about ten or eleven bricks in a crate.

The county in those days was primarily livestock. The county here can handle maybe 12,000 or 14,000 head of cows, at a maximum, with the current amount of tillable land. In those days, why, we had a big build up in the sheep industry to about 180,000 head of sheep, which was quite a business in those days. All the old homes around here were probably built from the sheep more than the cows. They exported their lambs, and they exported their wool, and today, why, that industry has gone to pot. They have about, oh, maybe 10,000 to 12,000 head of sheep here, and yet, the natural resources for that industry are still here. This is still a good place to grow sheep.

MB: What do you think of the factors involved that caused it to go down?

Nick: Well, one is labor. A lot of these sheepmen wouldn’t have been nearly so successful if it hadn’t been for the patience and prescience of the Mexican, or Spanish, people that were the herders. The herders really made the sheepmen. The sheepmen had to pay them, and keep things moving, but the Spanish-American people that came up from New Mexico, and some from old Mexico, were really the key to building up these vast herds that helped develop the whole Uinta Basin. In turn, the industry moved from here, which is an ideal wintering area, on over to the lush summer area of Colorado. Little by little, half of the sheepmen knew where the good grass was, came out of Utah and moved on over into Colorado to the lush summer ranges.

Of course, then in 1932, why, you had the Taylor Grazing Act that said one, unless you are a citizen that you couldn’t have permits on the range, and two, they allocated out permits, and little by little these permits were switched to where the sheep running on the Uinta Mountains were eventually transferred to the lush ranges of Colorado, which is a simple fact of economics.

MB: What was the point about being a citizen?

Nick: Well, the main reason that you had to be a citizen was because it’s only fair for citizens to have the right of the licenses on the federal range, which is federal law. We used to have an awful lot of nomad herds from the Greeks and the different fellows that worked in the mines down at Park City. They would form a little partnership and put a herd, or one of their group out with a herd of sheep up from Price into the Uinta Basin. Most of those fellows had come over from Greece to build the railroad. That was one of the criteria, and another criterion was that you had to use the range and have base properties to support the orderly annualized, really to support a basic livestock industry, whereas, these partnerships from Price were kind of “in and out” speculators. When the price got up, why, everybody would get into sheep business, and there would be too many here on occasion.

Then the country just grew little by little, more roads, more people. They opened a Gilsonite mine. That’s been a big economic contribution to the Uinta Basin. It’s been the steady

deal.

A lot of the fellows, for instance Mr. Meagher, was the one that named the Emerald Oil Company. They got a little star rig and got some patented land over here on the Rangely oil field, and drilled these little holes, maybe six hundred feet over there, and hit shallow oil.

MB: Were they wild-catting? Is that what they were doing?

Nick: Well, in those days you had to drill some holes in order to get the patent from the government on the land, just like you would develop a homestead.

There was old Alf Johnson, and a lot of the fellows formed this little Emerald Oil company. They first wanted to call it the Baku Oil Company from the Baku oil fields in Russia, but that name was taken in the state. He says, "Well, it's green oil. Let's call it Emerald Oil." So he was the one that named the Emerald Oil Company.

In those days, why, there was a lot of speculation on the placer gold sands, placer mining, out of the Green River, they would get little fleck gold. There were a lot of companies started and then went broke trying to retrieve gold flecks out of the sand in Green River.

The country always had a few sawmills to take care of the Basin's need. They had one or two mining prospects like the old Dyer Mine up there, which was a copper blowout. They built a little smelter up there, but, you see, the area was so isolated and transportation was so tough with no roads out here that this area has always been a little more-or-less self-sufficient, self-contained ever since it started.

The fellows that really developed this area drifted in as cowboys, primarily. There are some pretty salty ol' boys like Walt McCoy, Willis Johnson, Fletcher, and old C. W. Showalter. He used to be a harness maker. Dickie Jensen was a saddle maker. He made saddles for Butch Cassidy and probably knew Butch Cassidy better than anyone here from Vernal because he would supply him with all the saddles and cinches and bridles and et cetera.

MB: Was your dad involved with the BLM [Bureau of Land Management] or were you?

Nick: Well, he was and so was I, both of us. You see, he wasn't really too much in the sheep business. Coming from Ireland, well, he loved the land. He developed the Sunshine Ranch down in Jensen, which was probably the largest ranch, or farming operation, in the Basin. Then he developed the East Park Reservoir with this Mr. John Reader, and that was a seven-mile sidehill ditch out of Brush Creek in Jensen.

When the Depression came along, he had a few sheep. He sold out the Sunshine Ranch, and he had to take the Sunshine Ranch back when the Depression came. With it he got the land back, but we got about a \$4,000 annual tax bill. No one had any money during the Depression. All the sheepmen lost, for about four years in a row. They all had Packards, and Chryslers, and Chandlers, and Buicks in 1928 and 1929. In 1931, after the Depression started, well, they lost to beat the band, and in 1931, '32, '33, and '34. That liquidated down quite a few of the sheep herds. There's people that just went broke. Uinta Basin wouldn't have had it so tough, if we didn't have a three- or four-year drought right at the same time the Depression was on.

In those days we had the two banks here, one in Roosevelt, and then there were two banks in Price and one in Moab. There were bank failures in Heber City and Craig, Meeker, all around us, but in the Depression the eastern Utah banks were much stronger, and stayed above

board, than practically any other area of the state of Utah.

MB: That is what I was wondering. What kept them from going under when that was just happening everywhere?

Nick: Well, one thing was that everybody just had to tighten their belt. No one had any money. They were encouraged to just keep producing and this thing would turn around, but it didn't look that way for a long time. Finally, well, we got a little more moisture, and when you got a little more moisture you got bigger lambs, you got bigger calves. Little by little you started, not making a lot of money, but you were able to pay your bills. The deposits here shrunk, oh, I'd say about seventy percent. Today, nationally, if the deposits shrunk about twenty-five to thirty percent, half the banks in the whole countryside would be broke.

MB: You know, I had read that part of the problem in the Depression was that during the Coolidge Administration, you know, from... When did Harding die? 1921-22 to 28, that was a period when the bankers kind of went crazy around the country. I was wondering, at that time was the bank here more conservative?

Nick: No. You have got to realize that after World War I, the government encouraged everybody to grow wheat to feed starving Europe. Everybody went into the wheat business. There was a pretty good market for wheat. They produced all the wheat they could. They shipped it over to Europe. Then all of a sudden, why, Europe got on its feet, and they didn't need the wheat. So you had a big Depression in 1920 or '21. You had some hard winters for this area, but, of course, we didn't have the farmlands for the wheat, so that with the soldiers returning from the war, there was unemployment. Wheat was way down. It was less than, far less than, what it cost to produce it, and we had a river of it. That caused the total collapse of things in 1920-21.

And then, why, things got a little better in 1925, '26, '27, '28 and '29. Then we had a big collapse in 1929, and that was over-speculation. The deal with stocks, new products coming out, you had the movies, lithophone (?), you had the radio industry that was developing, RCA was coming off the carpet. Then, wham-o, why, this wild speculation came to an end, and people got hurt.

In that era the four fundamentals of production, which is an economic theory that's basic, are: land, labor, capital and management. Those four deals run just like a cylinder in a car, to produce anything, like glass, or whatever you are producing. In that era, two of the four cylinders were taking too much of the profit. That was capital and management. When the Depression came along, labor suffered, of course, and land.

There were labor problems in Detroit and they started the CIO. When Henry Ford gassed his plants and they had a sit-down strike, he told them, "You can sit down, but not on my property. If you do and you light a cigarette and this plant is loaded with gas, why, I'm going to lose my plant, but you might take a parachute ride."

It took some time. Capital just froze up, and when capital freezes up, then labor suffers. Of course, then little by little Roosevelt came in and they pinched out Hoover. Hoover was a good man, but these were drastic economic times, and they were bigger than government, and they were bigger than business and a lot of people suffered, which was unfortunate.

And then, why, government comes in, so today we have the five factors of production:

land, labor, capital, management and government, those five cylinders. To keep the bombs from dropping on the factory is a function of government, to guard it to where you don't have civil riots, and labor riots, and et cetera. That's the benevolent function of government. You still have to have those five factors rolling like the cylinders of a car to be able to produce, but I don't want to get into an economic lecture.

MB: Did you and your dad support Roosevelt?

Nick: I've always been kind of a Democrat, because the Republicans, since I have analyzed things, have always put up one man and expected him to carry the ball. They have put up some good men. I think Hoover was an outstanding man. The Democrats have worked more as a team to keep government, which has to function for an orderly society. I always felt that, although they do a lot of things that are wrong, why, there's better teamwork under a Democratic administration, if they use some common sense, than there has been under the Republicans. The Republicans put up a good man and give him a few men underneath him to support him, but government is just too big to not have a total team.

I still believe in the two-party system of government and I have voted for Republicans. I don't think that it is just the one man running for the office of president, although he's the executive of our government. The basic thing is to get good people in Congress that have good moral and ordinary common "horse-sense" to keep our dollar within bounds. It's like, put a plate of candy out for a bunch of kids, and tell them to take one. You turn your back on them, and the plate's gone.

Well, we've got to have fellows in Congress, both in the House and the Senate that are practical, that are philosophical, and realize that government's got to go not only during their incumbency, but on down through generations to keep our country as good as it has been, and to provide for poor people, and keep everybody working. People are happier when they are working right.

MB: Did your dad have similar sentiments?

Nick: Well, I don't know. I would say yes, because I think that. I remember that when Taft was running, he was kind of shocked that Eisenhower was put in. However, the public didn't realize that Taft had cancer. The Republicans made a change, right there, and he was happy to see Eisenhower go in and bring back more dignity into the office of the President of the United States. I remember him saying that, because he didn't like Truman too well, figured he was kind of a "barbershop quartet" guy, a pretty feisty little fellow, but the country needed some high-principled man in there. I think that President Eisenhower did bring back dignity to the office of President of the United States.

MB: Was there competition or cooperation between the two banks here in town a long time ago, when it was Uintah State Bank?

Nick: No, it's just the same as competition in any business. I know that when I was running the Bank of Vernal, and my dad, particularly, he didn't care what the other fellow did, as long as he did what was right, and had a good bank. There's always competition between merchants,

fellows on the range, cowmen fight over water holes, water and grass, and et cetera. Why, in other words, you don't worry about what the other fellow is doing. Worry about what you are doing.

MB: That's what I read was that that's why the Uintah State Bank was formed, was because some of the people didn't like the management of the bank that was here at that time.

Nick: Well, I would rather say that they had the idea to make Vernal an ideal political, social, and economic town, and the place had grown a little. You have got to realize that the Mormon influence had a clash, you might say.

MB: That's what I was referring to.

Nick: A lot of fellows weren't Mormons, and then there were a lot of fellows that came out here that had had clashes with Mormons in Salt Lake, or Brigham City, or Heber City, or what-have-you. There was a clash internally. I always felt that everybody's trying to get a lease on an acre of heaven, how the Sam Hill they get it is their affair. But there was some clash that went on between the fellows that came out here not under the [auspices] of the Church, you might say and the other fellows that came out there under the supervision of the Church. That's very true, because there were quite a few of them. I don't know what the reason was that they left, but I do know that right in that period, why, there was a difference in the type of people that were coming that way. You have got to realize that there was also quite an influence of people coming down from Colorado and Wyoming into this area.

And then, why, of course, a lot of the sheepmen that came in here, for instance that Jones, Warren and Edgar Jones, came up from Cedar City. The Seeleys came up from southern Utah.

MB: The Showalters did, too, didn't they?

Nick: I don't know where they came from. I thought they came out of Wyoming. Seems like Roy told me they came from down south. Well, another fellow would be Perry Olson, then the Bowens from Provo, Lafe and Don, and all the Bowens. There were a lot of fellows that came in here as surveyors. W. A. Banks was a surveyor, Doc Hirth came from Quincy, Illinois. Oh, gosh, there are a lot of fellows that came from Kentucky, and in that general area, that didn't come from Salt Lake. They more or less helped settle this whole doggone area and developed the area.

MB: That's one thing we are trying to do with our book, is make more things like that understood, because they are not generally known.

Nick: Well, you see, you had quite a few people. For instance, I think that the background of the Dillmans were part of the ol' "Gotche" (?) or part of Park Livestock Company that came down from Wyoming. The area over there around Neola was all owned by the old Park Livestock Company and they ran sheep in here. They all came down from Wyoming. So it was kind of a melting pot, you might say, of people. Well, for instance, Monkeses and some of them came out here when Park City mines closed.

You have got a good, diversified group of people in here. You didn't get all Swedes or

Danes, you got some of them, but you got a pretty good cross-section of people who were willing to work and they were venturesome to come out here because this is pretty isolated area.

MB: A fellow told me the other day that the reason he's stayed here in Vernal so long, he said, is that when he was a young man he had heard that the railroad was going to come through. He promised himself that he was going to take the first train out!

Nick: Well, it's a good place to live. It's a good climate. The country has been good. I remember in World War II, a lot of these young fellows left here because there weren't too many job opportunities and went out to Hill Field. They worked out there, and they said, "If I can just get enough money to buy twenty acres and get a house, and I've got a fishing pole, and a hunting knife, and a rifle, I can survive any kind of economic crisis, because I can grow a garden, I can kill a deer, I can get some fish, and I can sleep and eat, and grow a family."

MB: Did any of them do it?

Nick: Quite a few of them did, moved back out here. Quite a few of them.

MB: Say, I just have one more question for you, we are about done, just a minor point here. During the Depression, when they had the phenomenon of runs on banks and panics, was there anything even resembling that here?

Nick: No, I don't believe so because I know the Bank of Vernal opened immediately after the bank holiday. All banks were closed for two or three days, and I think the Uintah State Bank and the Bank of Vernal got their FDIC Insurance automatically and one of the first of out of about 14,000 to 15,000 banks, there were about 3,000 to 4,000 that opened automatically. Others had to be examined, and et cetera, before they would qualify for FDIC, so they were that strong. They were strong enough to open automatically, both banks.

MB: Okay. Well, that's about everything I had here. Is there anything you wanted to add?

Nick: Well, one thing that I would say about Mr. Meagher was that he worked hard and he worked for sixty-five years, before he retired, sixty-five years in this place and two or three out in Salt Lake. That was about sixty-eight years of solid work. He enjoyed good health until a stroke got him. He used to have a hard time renewing his automobile insurance because they had upper limits there on him, and they would make him take a physical exam and a reflex exam. But he turned in his driver's license at ninety-two. He didn't quite make it to ninety-four years of age. He enjoyed good health up until he got a stroke and that did him in in two or three weeks.

He lived a long, hard, productive life, and always had his shoulders back, and full steam ahead, and thought young, because he was always looking in the future rather than what's gone over the bridge in the past. I think everybody should take a leaf out of the more successful older people that stay young and enjoy the innovations of the computer age, the jet airplanes, the Sputniks to the moon. He just thought that was wonderful. I think the whole country did, to see those guys heading for the moon. And I think that's one deal of keeping a guy young, is to look forward, rather than back, because there's still all kinds of challenges in life, and there's all kinds

of opportunities, if you make your opportunities.

End